

A Survey of Foreign Language Writing Anxiety among Chinese High School Students

Wenjun Wang

School of English Language Literature and Culture, Beijing Second Foreign Language Institute, Beijing, China
13121273353 2021220045@stu.bisu.edu.cn

Abstract:

Currently, there is anxiety in English writing among Chinese high school students, but there is a lack of research on this group in this field. This paper conducted an experiment on foreign language writing anxiety among Chinese high school students. This experiment was based on a survey questionnaire improved from the scale, and a questionnaire survey was conducted on 102 participants, identifying three factors that lead to writing anxiety: Conceptual & Exam Anxiety, Practice & Avoidance Anxiety, and Writing Habit Anxiety. Research has found that Chinese high school students generally experience foreign language (English) writing anxiety, with an average of moderate to high. There is a significant difference in the level of anxiety between the high and low-writing achievement groups in different types. There is a significant negative correlation between writing anxiety and academic performance. Through further research and discussion, it has been found that there are problems with the current teaching arrangement of high school English writing, mainly manifested in the lack of emphasis on writing, the inability of teachers to provide effective assistance to students, and the unreasonable arrangement of exam structures. These are all reasons that cause students to develop writing anxiety. This paper proposes corresponding solutions based on the identified problems.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, foreign language writing, writing anxiety, second language writing anxiety scale

1. Introduction

As China's position in various fields such as politics, economy, and culture continues to improve, it needs more groups to use the global common language, English. The Ministry of Education has repeatedly adjusted the standards for English teaching in ordinary high schools in China, and the overall difficulty is increasing. The English test aims to comprehensively test students' English abilities, including reading, grammar, writing, etc. Therefore, writing is essential to all English exams during high school. Due to strong subjectivity, lack of strict standard answers, and a certain gap in language expression ability among ordinary high school students, writing is often the most difficult part of progress, which has caused some ordinary high school students to develop English writing anxiety.

Based on a large number of recent studies on second language acquisition teaching, various experimental data indicate that emotional factors affect the success of second language acquisition. Due to its unique characteristics, foreign language writing anxiety has also been separately listed as an independent subject for analysis and research.

Foreign language writing anxiety mainly involves the relationship between anxiety and other emotional factors, language factors, and social-psychological factors. There is a significant negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and writing performance, and this anxiety can affect the writer's willpower, motivation, and interest. Foreign language writing anxiety belongs to obstructive anxiety, which can dispel learners' desire to learn and hinder the smooth progress of the writing process, leading to writing difficulties and ultimately affecting writing performance [1].

Some studies targeting Chinese high school students indicate that the foreign language writing anxiety caused by high school students is caused by multiple factors, first of all, a lack of critical thinking [2,3]. Additionally, exam anxiety may arise under the requirements of the curriculum standards, including psychological resilience, family environment, and evaluations from others [4].

Although there has been a lot of research on foreign language writing anxiety recently, there has been very little research on the group of Chinese high school students. Most of the research groups are college English majors.

Through comparative analysis of anxiety levels, it is indirectly proven that there is a negative growth relationship between anxiety levels and academic performance. Therefore, based on the Second Language Writing Anxiety Scale, this experiment conducted a questionnaire survey on the writing anxiety status of 106 Chinese ordinary high school students, aiming to explore the types of writing anxiety among Chinese ordinary high school students, discover problems in the education process, and provide improvement methods or suggestions for the existing problems.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This experiment explores the types, degrees, and correlations between writing anxiety and academic performance among Chinese high school students. Therefore, this study chose the SLWAI Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) as the testing basis. This scale consists of 22 items and is graded as a 5-point Likert scale, transitioning from “completely disagree” to “strongly agree.” The questions in this scale fully meet the needs of this experiment and can be used to collect all the data needed for this experiment. This scale is a mature scale that has been used in many foreign language writing anxiety experiments before [5].

Because this experiment focuses on the writing anxiety of Chinese ordinary high school students, based on similar experimental and survey methods, this experiment has added some questions based on the learning and testing forms of English writing in high school to the survey questionnaire, aiming to obtain more targeted information and data that can cause foreign language writing anxiety in this specific group of Chinese ordinary high school students [6]. Because the subjects were all Chinese students,

this experiment translated all the questions into English on the scale. In addition, according to the needs of correlation research, the questionnaire also surveyed the English writing scores, namely the composition section of the English subject final exam. All participants were tested after at least 19 weeks of the same teaching work in the same semester and given unified propositions and articles roughly the same length within a limited time. A 20-point overall scoring method was used. Through research, this article aims to answer the following three questions:

- a) Is there anxiety in foreign language writing among Chinese high school students?
- b) Are there differences in anxiety among students with different writing levels?
- c) How does foreign language writing anxiety affect academic performance?

2.2 Trial Testing

This experiment was tested based on previous mature experimental cases [7]. After factor analysis, the overall scale and various factor subscales were subjected to reliability tests to verify their reliability. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient showed that the total scale was 0.643, Conceptual &Exam Anxiety was 0.951, practice anxiety was 0.935, and Writing Habit Anxiety was 0.647, all within acceptable ranges. This also indicates that the intrinsic reliability of each scale is relatively high.

In addition, this study conducted an exploratory factor analysis on the questions in the questionnaire, with a KMO value of 0.935, indicating suitability for exploratory factor analysis, resulting in three factors. Except for excluding questions with loadings less than 0.4 on all three factors (low correlation), exclude all questions with loadings above 0.4. The questions obtained for participating in the experiment are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Data of survey questionnaire.

Factors	Question Number	Questionnaire Question Description	Load value
Conceptual &Exam Anxiety	1	I have the same mindset during exams and daily practice of English writing.	0.863
	2	I usually don't have time to brainstorm writing content during English exams.	0.847
	3	I often get nervous during exams, which leads to forgetting how to write what I would have written.	0.831
	4	I think my psychological quality is very good.	0.818
	5	When I write an English essay within the designated time, I feel nervous and shiver or break out in a cold sweat.	0.807
	6	When my English essay is graded, I worry about a low score.	0.797

	7	I don't mind my classmates borrowing my English writing skills after exams.	0.792
	8	In situations where time is limited, my thoughts may become chaotic.	0.761
	9	When writing an essay in English, I feel nervous and uneasy if I know the teacher will grade it.	0.743
	10	I feel anxious about content other than writing in English exams.	0.721
	11	My writing level or score does not differ much between exams and regular practice.	0.720
	12	I spent similar time on exams and practicing English writing daily.	0.713
Practice&Avoidance Anxiety	13	I usually try to avoid writing articles in English as much as possible.	0.878
	14	I will try my best to avoid writing essays in English.	0.863
	15	I won't write an essay in English unless I have no choice.	0.858
	16	Whenever possible, I will write essays in English.	0.841
	17	I often write my feelings and thoughts in English.	0.804
	18	I think I practice writing in English enough in my daily life.	0.789
Writing Habit Anxiety	19	I have a good grasp of English grammar.	0.744
	20	I have a habit of conceptualizing before writing in English.	0.802
	21	I hope the teacher can encourage or praise me for my English writing.	0.790

2.3 Data Collection

The research subjects of this study are first-year students from a district-level key ordinary high school in Beijing who have studied foreign languages (English) for at least nine years. This study adopted a random sampling method. 106 questionnaires were collected during the questionnaire statistics process, including 102 valid questionnaires, with 41 males and 61 females (4 invalidated due to inability to provide accurate scores). According to the school's curriculum standards and teaching arrangements, there is no separate English writing teaching, training, or homework arrangement for each semester. All uniformly arranged English writing projects follow the test. A total of six units are studied each semester, and unit tests are available at the end of each unit. In addition to the fixed mid-term and final exams, the unified writing volume for each semester is eight articles, and according to the requirements of the college entrance examination questions, all writing questions are in the form of letters.

3. Statistics

3.1 Descriptive Statistical Results

According to the Likert 5-point scale, for the average val-

ue, a score higher than or equal to 3.5 in this study indicates high anxiety, a score lower than 3.4 and higher than 2.5 indicates moderate anxiety and a score lower than or equal to 2.4 indicates low anxiety. Overall, the average writing anxiety value is 3.1573, which belongs to the range of moderate anxiety. Conceptual &Exam Anxiety and practice anxiety are 3.2225 and 3.1106, respectively, all of which are moderate anxiety values. Among them, Conceptual &Exam Anxiety are closer to the high anxiety range. The average score of Writing Habit Anxiety is 3.5294, which belongs to high anxiety. Overall, foreign language writing anxiety exists and is in a middle to high-level state.

The descriptive statistics of writing scores indicate that the average score of this test is 13.8922, which is considered moderate difficulty.

For the description statistics of the parts that are most prone to anxiety except for the writing part, as shown in Table 2, it can be seen that 66.7% of students have significant anxiety about the reading comprehension part, followed by 17% of students who believe that cloze tests are the most likely to cause them anxiety. The proportion of students who experience anxiety in listening and language use is the lowest.

Table 2. I believe that besides the writing section, the parts where I am most prone to anxiety are.

		Frequency	Percentage	Effective Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Effective	Hearing	9	8.8	8.8	8.8
	Language Using (Multiple Choice Questions on Words and Grammar)	8	7.8	7.8	16.7
	Cloze Test	17	16.7	16.7	33.3
	Reading Comprehension	68	66.7	66.7	100.0
	Total	102	100.0	100.0	

3.2 Differences in Anxiety Between High and Low Achievement Groups

According to the number of people who submitted valid questionnaires and their writing scores, those with scores below the average (i.e., less than 14 points) will be assigned to the low score group. In comparison, those with scores above the average (or equal to 14 points) will be assigned to the high score group. Through grouping sta-

tistics, it can be seen that there is a significant difference in anxiety between the two achievement groups, as shown in Table 3. Overall, the anxiety of the low-achievement group is higher than that of the high-achievement group. The average anxiety of the low achieving group was significantly higher than that of the high achieving group in terms of Conceptual &Exam Anxiety, Practice&Avoidance Anxiety, but the Writing Habit Anxiety factor was opposite.

Table 3. Grouping statistics.

	Score	N	Mean Value	Standard Deviation	Average of Standard Deviation
Foreign Language Writing Anxiety (Overall Anxiety)	>= 14.00	51	2.8898	41376	05794
	< 14.00	51	3.4248	44730	06263
Conceptual &Exam Anxiety	>= 14.00	51	2.9510	39622	05548
	< 14.00	51	3.2941	37836	05298
Writing Habit Anxiety	>= 14.00	51	3.8137	64001	08962
	< 14.00	51	3.2451	73738	10325
Practice&Avoidance Anxiety	>= 14.00	51	2.5210	89708	12562
	< 14.00	51	3.7003	70059	09810

3.3 Related Analysis Results

The correlation between writing performance and writing anxiety was tested in this experiment using the Pearson correlation coefficient. As shown in Table 4, it can be seen that there is a significant negative correlation between overall anxiety in foreign language writing and writing performance. Among the three factors, Conceptual &Exam Anxiety and practice anxiety are all significantly

negatively correlated with writing performance, while Writing Habit Anxiety is significantly positively correlated with writing performance. Overall, it reflects the relationship between higher foreign language writing anxiety and lower academic performance, with Practice&Avoidance Anxiety having the greatest impact on writing performance.

Table 4. Correlation analysis.

		Foreign Language Writing Anxiety (Overall Anxiety)	Conceptual &Exam Anxiety	Practice&Avoidance Anxiety	Writing Habit Anxiety
Score	Pearson correlation	-.625**	-.485**	-.714**	538**
	Significance (Double Layer)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
	Cross-Product	-102.793	-66.610	-231.354	130.074
	Covariance	-1.018	-.660	-2.291	1.288
	Number of Cases	102	102	102	102
**Indicates significant correlation at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).					

4. Discussion

Most experiments have shown that anxiety is prevalent in the process of second language acquisition, taking Chinese students learning English as an example. According to most experimental results, the common cause of second language acquisition anxiety is, first and foremost, a lack of confidence or resistance among students towards using a foreign language, mainly due to a lack of self-efficacy [1,7]. Meanwhile, teachers' inappropriate teaching methods are also an important reason for this [8]. Most studies on foreign language writing by Chinese students indicate that their writing anxiety stems from a lack of time or awareness in the pre-writing stage (conceptualization, draft, etc.), or a low proportion of writing, low frequency of writing practice, and lack of practice in English learning and exams [9]. The experiment also analyzed whether this is due to students lacking self-efficacy or insecure attachment [1,10]. In addition, it may also be due to the lack of support or satisfaction in the writing enjoyment students receive in foreign language writing [6]. Based on the experimental data obtained in this experiment, it can be mainly seen that several problems in the teaching process can cause foreign language writing anxiety to different factors and degrees. In addition to the proven reasons for student writing anxiety due to lack of practice or confidence in other experiments, there are also shortcomings in foreign language writing in teaching work.

4.1 Teaching Arrangements

The results of comparing writing scores and anxiety groups in experimental data show that the differences between high and low-score groups are not only reflected in the degree of anxiety but also the types of anxiety. According to the data of the low-achieving group, their average scores of ideation and exam anxiety, as well as practice and avoidance anxiety, are significantly higher than those of the high-achieving group. This reflects that their

conceptual ability and writing skills are relatively poor in reality. Apart from rarely doing exercises in their spare time, this is also related to teaching arrangements. Due to the lack of emphasis on foreign language writing in teaching arrangements, completing teaching tasks according to curriculum standards is not enough for students to master writing skills and abilities.

From a unified curriculum standard perspective, the writing schedule of 8 articles per semester is insufficient. Teaching related to writing only includes analyzing short essay questions, appreciating short essay samples from exams, and explaining how to apply answer templates to questions. The student's English homework has no writing content. Overall, the current curriculum arrangement for writing teaching is incomplete, with limited duration, making it difficult to systematically explain the content and for students to understand the key points of writing.

According to most schools' teaching arrangement, foreign language writing is not based on discussing the best writing materials and methods according to the questions. Still, it requires students to proficiently master and apply answer templates to obtain clearer scoring points. For students in the low-achieving group, although using a template can make it easier to remember scoring points and techniques, once a new question type that does not apply to the template appears, it cannot be addressed. For high-achieving groups or students who are interested in writing and have low levels of writing avoidance, templates are detrimental to divergent and independent thinking. They cannot meet their needs for trying and using more writing modes and types. At present, this teaching model that requires students to use fixed templates for exam writing only reflects the handling of writing items in the exam rather than focusing on the essence of cultivating students' writing thinking and abilities.

In summary, this paper aims to increase foreign language writing class hours and practice (or homework) arrange-

ments in English teaching for ordinary high schools, at least ensuring that all students can learn sufficient writing methods and skills through a unified teaching schedule. At the same time, students can but are not limited to using fixed answer templates, and teachers should encourage students to choose or even design better writing methods that suit them. If a student designs a writing style or technique suitable for themselves and helpful for writing progress, they can share and discuss it with the whole class with their consent.

4.2 Teachers' Ineffective Assistance to Students in Foreign Language Writing

Due to the lack of clear standard answers for grammar application (multiple-choice questions) and reading comprehension in foreign language writing, it is difficult for teachers to evaluate or guide student compositions. Not only does it require more time to read different compositions from students, but it also requires targeted treatment for different problems, such as grammar, sentence structure usage, etc. This will consume a lot of time and energy from teachers, and work efficiency is not high.

4.2.1 Common Avoidance and resistance in low achieving groups

According to the survey, students in the low-achieving group generally do not choose or even avoid additional English writing exercises, mainly due to their lack of awareness of their abilities and confidence in themselves. Therefore, in the question "I hope the teacher can give me encouragement or high praise for my English writing," most of them chose "oppose" or "completely oppose." This indicates they are very concerned about the teacher's help, as they believe they will be dissatisfied or criticized by the teacher due to their insufficient knowledge reserves or lack of proficiency in using them. It has been proven that they have caused dissatisfaction and criticism from teachers in the classroom or privately seeking advice for such reasons. Therefore, they choose to minimize contact with teachers or discuss writing-related issues as much as possible. They believe that teachers are not people who answer questions and solve doubts but people who put pressure on them.

4.2.2 The general writing interest in the high-achieving group

In group statistics, it is evident that the average value of writing habit anxiety in the high-achieving group is significantly higher than that in the low-achieving group when the average values of the other two anxiety factors are significantly lower. The problem with a high load value, "I hope the teacher can encourage or highly evaluate my English writing," has a high level of anxiety. This

type of anxiety is because the teacher did not give enough attention to these high-achieving or interested students in writing. Some students have expressed a strong interest in English writing through interviews and records. Sometimes, I also write English novels or poems in my spare time, but teachers often hold a negative or even opposing attitude towards it. Some students may hope that the teacher can provide some revision suggestions for their writing, but the teacher will reject these students' requests with reasons such as "your writing score is already very high, and you need to do more reading comprehension questions when you have time."

Therefore, this paper suggests that teachers should always maintain patience with their students; for students who are not good at writing, guidance and encouragement can reduce their avoidance and anxiety towards writing. For students who have excellent grades or are interested in writing, supporting them in writing in more fields or genres of foreign languages is advisable without delaying their in-class learning. If conditions permit and consent is obtained, writing exhibitions or communication activities can be carried out to enhance students' interest in English writing.

4.3 Unreasonable Arrangement of Exam Structure

According to the statistical table, 66.7% of participants believe that reading comprehension is the most anxiety-prone part besides writing. According to the order of the exam questions, reading comprehension occurs right before writing. Due to the playback of the recording, the listening test is the only part of the entire exam process that has a fixed time for everyone (because the end of the recording is the end of the test, and all answers must be taken during the recording playback process). However, there is no clear and fixed time limit for the remaining parts, and students allocate the time for completing the remaining parts independently. This can easily make all students who may have difficulties or are not good at reading comprehension extend their answering time, reducing the time left for the writing section. For students who have a habit of conceptualization, it means they do not have enough time to conceive. Especially in group statistics, the reason why the average score of writing habit anxiety is much higher in the high-scoring group than in the low-scoring group is because reading comprehension has greatly affected students' thinking about writing and even their exam mentality, leading them to worry about answering the reading comprehension part or other parts when completing the writing part, and unable to concentrate on completing the writing part.

This paper suggests that relevant departments optimize

the testing structure or process and try not to arrange parts that are prone to anxiety for students in a continuous manner, such as separating reading comprehension and writing from grammar multiple-choice questions that are not prone to anxiety or imitate the testing methods of the College English Test Band 4 or IELTS, that is, divide the testing into sections, and collect the test papers and answer sheets after completing a part, reducing the influence of other parts on students when answering questions, reducing psychological fluctuations, and playing to their true level.

4.4 The Singularity of Writing Content and Subject Matter

Through a survey of the Beijing College Entrance Examination English test papers in the past five years and the various English test papers of the school in the past academic year, the writing section is in the format of “If you are Li Hua, please write a letter of XXX to your foreign pen friend/friend XXX”. However, in reality, English writing is not only in letters. Continuously practicing writing in the same genre can make students feel bored and may also make some students who are good at other types of foreign language writing but not good at letter writing doubt their writing ability, resulting in unnecessary anxiety.

This paper suggests that relevant departments optimize the testing content and add writing topics with different themes to change the stagnant status of letter writing.

5. Conclusion

This paper finds that English writing anxiety among Chinese high school students is moderate but close to a high level. There are significant differences in the types and degrees of anxiety between high and low-achievement groups, with a negative growth relationship between writing performance and writing anxiety. Practice and Avoidance Anxiety have the greatest impact on writing performance.

This paper analyzes the current problems in foreign language writing teaching from the perspective of school teaching arrangements and proposes solutions or improvement measures based on the problems. It also actively explores the improvement of teaching methods and writing tests. However, this study also has some limitations, such

as all participants coming from the same school, small population size, and randomness in individual scores. If there is follow-up research, a larger group of participants should be selected, and their multiple test scores should be statistically analyzed to reduce the randomness of their scores and to more objectively determine the situation of students' foreign language writing anxiety.

References

- [1]Wu J Q, Liu L K, Li L, et al. The relationship between unsafe attachment and foreign language anxiety in college students: the chain mediating effect of self-efficacy and self-esteem. *Journal of Guizhou Normal University*, 2023, 39 (11): 74-79.
- [2]Xiong Q. Research on applying topic chunks in high school English teaching under the new curriculum standards. *Journal of Yuzhang Normal University*, 2023, 38 (06): 100-104.
- [3]Kholstinina T, Vekovishcheva S, Kochetova A. A modern approach to communicative language teaching in English classes in high school. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 2021.
- [4]Wang X H. A survey on English exam anxiety among 799 high school students. *Chinese Journal of Health Psychology*, 2007, (02): 97-100.
- [5]Cheng Y S. A measure of second language writing anxiety: Scale development and preliminary validation. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 2004, 13(4): 313-335.
- [6]Wang J. Research on the relationship and intervention of foreign language writing anxiety, self-efficacy in foreign language writing, and performance among high school students. *Jiangxi Normal University*, 2021.
- [7]Guo Y, Qin X Q. Investigation of foreign language writing anxiety among college students and its implications for writing teaching. *Crazy English (Teacher's Edition)*, 2009, (04): 27-31+65.
- [8]Bensalem E, Thompson A S. Multilingual effects on EFL learning: a comparison of foreign language anxiety and self-confidence experienced by bilingual and multilingual tertiary students. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 2022.
- [9]Zhang R S, Yuan L M. A study on the relationship between foreign language anxiety, self-efficacy, and foreign language performance among college students. *Psychological Development and Education*, 2004, (03): 56-61.
- [10]Guo J Y. Correlation analysis between high school English writing anxiety and self-efficacy in English writing. *Hubei Normal University*, 2023.